

Democrats' White Hopes

Having written Gary Hart's political obituary with gusto, the American mass media have been extraordinarily reluctant to admit its corollary - that the Rev Jesse Jackson has become the front runner in the race for the US Democratic nomination. Now that the Rainbow Coalition is no longer an exotic curiosity but a formidable alternative, its press coverage has proportionately decreased. Leading the field in all the opinion polls, Jackson is disparaged as a 'spoiler' or quixotic 'idealist', while tortured arguments advance the chances of obscure figures like Senator Paul Simon (Illinois).

The official 'white hopes' of this racist Democratic sub-discourse represent a tiny, compressed band of political difference amongst themselves. Highest in popularity behind Jackson is Governor Michael Dukakis (Massachusetts), whose well-financed campaign has rescued many of the shipwrecked crew of Gary Hart. The disingenuous strategy of the Dukakis camp is the promotion of the governor as the messiah who led the high-tech gentrification of the once rusty Massachusetts economy: a credit more properly due to the billions of dollars of military spending which Reagan has pumped into the state. Dukakis's more modest but original achievement is a pioneering 'workfare' programme, admired by many Thatcherites in the UK, which has forced 20,000 welfare mothers into low-wage service jobs.

In a variation on the same theme, the ex-governor of Arizona, Bruce Babbitt - campaigning without stop for the past two years - boasts of his helmsmanship of a conservative sunbelt state. Certainly what Arizona labour will never forget about Babbitt was his 1983 mobilisation of the national guard in their armoured personnel carriers to break a

two-year-old copper strike. Senator Joseph Biden (Delaware), winner of the perennial JFK clone contest, also appeals to the baby-boom mainstream with 'make my day' toughness: opposing school bussing and a federal funding of abortions for poor women, supporting freezes in social spending and 'legitimate' US intervention in Latin America.

Rep Richard Gephardt (Missouri), one of the leaders of the House Democrats, has long been the Mephistopheles of Democratic realignment. In 1984 he was instrumental in establishing the centre-right Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) as a parallel power-structure to the Democratic national committee with the stated aim of 'returning' the party to the 'white, male middle class'. Faced with so many mirror images of himself,

however, Gephardt is trying to differentiate his candidacy by advocating a protectionist trade policy - a stance that endears him to union leaders like the AFL-CIO's Secretary, Lane Kirkland. Meanwhile, Senator Sam Nunn (Georgia) coquettishly signals his availability from the sidelines. The chair of the powerful armed services committee and another founder of the DLC, Nunn is the relentless advocate of streamlined Atlanticism; after Reykjavik, he led the attack on Reagan for 'weakening Nato'.

Finally, much mystery continues to surround the reasons for the sudden collapse of the Mario Cuomo boom earlier this year: it is unclear whether there are skeletons in the family closet (a *la* Ferraro), or simply a famine of policies beyond the eloquent platitudes. Cuomo has been like the great sphinx in his silence on foreign policy, especially US intervention in Central America. Unlike Lee Iaccocca



Jackson: the only real opposition to Reagan

(Who wants to be president during a depression?'), the governor of New York has not given the definitive reason for his withdrawal and may be awaiting the mutual ruin of the other contenders to open a walk-on nomination next June.

At any event, all seven white hopes - as well as the most frequently mentioned long shots (including Dale Bumpers of Arkansas and Albert Gore Jnr of Kentucky) - offer policies that can be easily rounded off into relative indistinction. Their common, underlying premise is that Reaganism will leave certain enduring legacies that must be accommodated: a right wing federal judiciary, a continuing federal deficit, a quasi-legal ceiling on social spending (the Gramm-Rudman Act), and a series of mega-weapons programme. The supply-side panaceas of 'neoliberalism' which Gary Hart invoked in 1984 have been scaled down to 'pragmatic liberalism', or, as some DLCers like to call it, 'the pursuit of liberal ends by conservative means'.

In contrast, the Rainbow Coalition remains the only national voice in the United States calling for the roll back, not merely the domestication, of Reaganism. What panics the Democratic establishment is that the synchronised March primaries - explicitly organised by the DLC to stop Jackson and ensure the nomination of a white Southerner - may backfire in Jackson's favour as blacks vote in unprecedented numbers. Moreover, this time round, the Jackson campaign enjoys the virtually unanimous support of the Left (split over Mondale in 1984) and black leaders, and broad endorsements from union branches and farm groups - constituencies whose interests Jackson has tirelessly advocated over the past three years. In a period when many Democrats are more eager to get Ollie North's autograph than throw him into jail the real opposition to Reaganism will find itself in the Rainbow Coalition. •

Mike Davis